

Deeply rooted past provides hope for future

Parish Profile



St. Mary,
Canandaigua

Lee Strong
Senior staff writer

CANANDAIGUA — There is a story that during the wave of anti-Catholic violence in the early 1850s, armed parishioners were stationed in the church one night by the parish's first resident pastor, Father Edmund O'Connor, to protect it from attack.

The fact that the people responded to his call to defend the church is typical of parishioners of St. Mary's, 95 N. Main St.

Take, for example, when an addition suddenly had to be built on the school in the 1950s, or when a fire heavily damaged one of the school's wings in the 1970s, or when — most recently — money was needed to save the parish's historic convent. Time and time again, parishioners and people in Canandaigua have rallied to come up with the necessary money and labor.

Such activism surfaces not only during crises, however. Indeed, the parish, which this year is celebrating its 150th anniversary, has a rich history of involved members.

The parish boasts one of the diocese's few active St. Vincent de Paul Soci-



S. John Wilkin/Staff photographer
Stephanie Servage (left) and her mother Jane work together April 19 on a banner to be displayed at Stephanie's first Communion celebration. It marked the last of a series of workshops at St. Mary's School for young parishioners and their parents.



Jonathon Brown and his mother Jane work together to complete Jonathon's banner.

eties, which provides Christmas gifts and Easter baskets for the poor, and runs a weekly clothes closet for Canandaigua's needy.

Witnessing With the Poor, a sub-committee of the parish's social ministry committee, provides on a regular basis education on social issues at weekend Masses. St. Mary's also holds a monthly food collection.

The parish's faith formation ministry — formerly the religious education program — has also embraced the lifelong education goal put forth at the diocese's seventh Synod Oct. 1-3, 1993. In ad-

dition to housing a Catholic school, St. Mary's has more than 500 children and 110 high school students involved with religious education programs; 114 children are currently preparing for first Communion.

Meanwhile, the Canandaigua church offers adult "faith growth opportunities" through such programs as the Mercy Center with the Aging series, held in the parish last fall, and Bible study. The parish is also considering hiring a youth minister. And a weekly spiritual sharing group meets inside the convent.

One committee seeks ways to support the school — including scheduling a concert by Phyllis Contestable and Alan Jones, slated for 8 p.m. May 14 at Canandaigua Academy — while another has been overseeing the renovation of the parish's historic convent by actively seeking grants and volunteer laborers.

Every summer, the parish stages a festival over two weekends. Meanwhile, as part of this year's anniversary celebration, volunteers have started a 150th Anniversary Campaign that has already netted more than \$96,000 in pledges.

That celebration also includes an organ concert in the church by C.J. Sambach, slated for 4 p.m. May 1; a parish census currently being completed; as well as a Mass and dinner with Bishop Matthew H. Clark, scheduled for Oct. 7.

"It's a real active parish," acknowledged lifelong parishioner, Francis Wardwell. "There's something doing a lot of the time."

"It's such an alive parish," noted Monette Mahoney, who has been St. Mary's faith formation ministry director since
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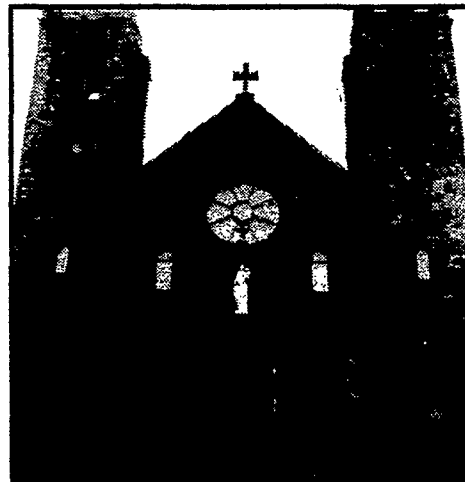
Parish rich in history blessed with historical buildings

By Father Robert F. McNamara
Guest contributor

When the city of Canandaigua was incorporated as a village in 1815, its citizenry already included several prosperous families of distinction. The first Catholics to settle there did not arrive until 1830. Immigrants from Ireland, they were not prosperous. But they were enterprising, and the local parish they established would make its own contribution to the annals of this lovely county seat.

In 1830 the Catholic church closest to Canandaigua was St. Patrick's in Rochester. By the early 1840s, in light of Canandaigua's growing Catholic population, Father Bernard O'Reilly, then-pastor of St. Patrick's, came down to offer the first Mass in the village.

Mass and visits continued thereafter from time to time, but by 1843 Father O'Reilly urged the increasing body of Catholics to erect their own church building. This first St. Mary's Church (1845) stood at the corner of South Main and Saltonstall streets. After existing as a mission of St. Francis de Sales Church in Geneva for four years, St. Mary's was finally given a resident pastor, Father Edmund O'Connor



(1849-58). The red brick structure had to be enlarged in 1852 and 1862, but it served its purpose until replaced by the current St. Mary's building in 1905.

A trio of notable events occurred during old St. Mary's first three decades.

The first event, on Dec. 8, 1854, was the founding of St. Mary's Convent by the Sisters of St. Joseph.

Invited by Buffalo's Bishop John Timon, four sisters from Carondelet, Mo., moved into the Lysaght residence on Saltonstall Street — just east of the church. This was the first mission of the Josephite Sisters in the state. St. Mary's Convent quickly became, as

well, a novitiate, a school, an orphanage, and a residence for needy young women. In 1864, the sisters also undertook the direction of St. Mary's Boys' Orphanage in Rochester.

When Bishop Bernard J. McQuaid arrived in 1868 as Rochester's first bishop, he persuaded the sisters in the two convents to form an independent community, the current Rochester Sisters of St. Joseph. St. Mary's, Canandaigua, was therefore the cradle of our diocese's largest sisterhood.

The second historic event was not known to the parishioners until long after it happened. It was the attendance at Easter Sunday Mass, April 16, 1865, of a man suspected of being a conspirator in the assassination — two days before — of President Abraham Lincoln.

John Wilkes Booth mortally wounded Lincoln at Ford's Theater in Washington on Good Friday, April 14, and the president died on Holy Saturday, April 15. John H. Surratt Jr. (1843-1916), a young Catholic Marylander, passed that Easter weekend in Canandaigua. He was a Confederate secret agent, who had been reconnoitering the federal prison camp at Elmira where hundreds of Confederate soldiers were still interned.

Surratt had earlier been a co-conspirator with Booth in a stupid — and unsuccessful — plot to abduct the president, but he had drawn the line at murder. On arriving at Canandaigua on Holy Saturday, the young spy learned of Booth's crime; and when he took the train for Albany on Easter Monday, he was already aware that the federal government was tailing him as a possible accomplice. His mother, Mary Surratt, convicted of complicity in an unfair trial, was hanged in Washington on July 9, 1865. Fleeing to Europe, Surratt evaded his pursuers for two years. When finally arrested in Egypt in 1867, he was brought back to face the court, but freed through a mistrial.

The third big event was the current convent's purchase in April, 1873, during the pastorate of Father Dennis English. Although the second convent, located at 16 Gibson St. off North Main, cost \$20,000, it was a quality acquisition: the Greek Revival mansion of General John A. Granger, dating from 1834.

John Granger was the son of Canandaiguan Gideon Granger, postmaster general during the cabinets of Presidents Thomas Jefferson and
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